



National
Autism Safety
Council™



Autism & Online Safety

Education & Safe Practices

A Comprehensive Guide for Caregivers



Featuring

SAFECLICKS

FOR AUTISM™

About This Guide

This guide was created in collaboration with families, clinicians, educators, first responders, and service professionals.

It integrates knowledge from:

- **Current research**
- **Field expertise**
- **Lived experience**

The content reflects proven practices and the most up-to-date knowledge available at the time of publication.

This guide is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended to serve as medical or legal advice and should not replace consultation with qualified healthcare providers, behavioral specialists, or legal professionals.

Every child, individual, and family is unique, and decisions about safety planning and intervention should be made in collaboration with trusted professionals familiar with your individual needs.



National
Autism Safety
Council™

*Advancing Autism Safety Through
Science, Expertise & Collaboration*



Understanding Autism and Online Safety

As technology becomes an integral part of daily life, online safety is a critical issue for autistic children, teens, and adults.

Digital spaces and tools can offer meaningful opportunities for communication, learning, creativity, and connection, especially for individuals who rely on AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) devices or who find in-person social interaction challenging. For some autistic individuals, online environments may be their primary or most comfortable means of communication and social participation.

However, differences in social communication, perspective-taking, and risk awareness can also make autistic individuals especially vulnerable to online harm. Autistic individuals may take language literally, struggle to detect sarcasm, manipulation, or deception, and have a strong desire for friendship or shared interests. These traits can be exploited by bad actors through online grooming, scams, coercion, or manipulation.

Reliance on online tools for exploring special interests, or on AAC devices and visual or text-based communication can further increase vulnerability. Individuals may click on links, images, or suggested content without fully understanding the context, intent, or legality of what they are accessing. As a result, they may inadvertently encounter or interact with illegal, explicit, or harmful content without recognizing what it is or why it is dangerous.

In addition, cyberbullying, harassment, and social exclusion can have a profound emotional impact, increasing anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal.

Online safety for autistic individuals is not about restriction alone; it is about teaching skills, building awareness, and creating supportive guardrails that promote safe, informed, and confident digital participation.



Key Online Safety Risks

- *Difficulty interpreting tone, sarcasm, or hidden intent, making manipulation harder to detect*
- *Increased likelihood of oversharing personal information*
- *Strong focus on special interests, which can be used by predators to build trust*
- *Desire for validation or friendship that may lead to unsafe online relationships*
- *Higher risk of cyberbullying, social targeting, and emotional distress*
- *Challenges knowing when and how to report uncomfortable interactions*
- *Clicking on illegal content without understanding what it is*



C Create Safe Setups



Create child-specific accounts with parental controls and privacy settings, use strong passwords and teach safety explicitly, disable location sharing, and stay informed about apps, trends, and risks that exploit trust or special interests.

L Look at Online Activity



Know who is communicating with your child, including chats and comments. Also, watch for behavior changes, use monitoring tools matched to developmental level and support needs, and create a profile that allows you to befriend your child online if needed.

I Investigate Apps



Review content, chats, and privacy settings together using visuals, and discuss social norms like teasing or sarcasm. Plan responses to unsafe interactions, and set clear rules for messaging, voice, and live streaming.

C Control Content and Permissions



Use parental controls to restrict harmful content and support regulation, and disable messaging or comments when needed. Choose developmentally appropriate platforms, and limit access to unmoderated forums or live chats.

K Keep Communicating



Start conversations early and keep them brief and frequent. Use concrete examples, visuals, and role-play to teach what to do, and encourage reporting without fear of punishment or device loss.

S Stay Focused on Safety Skills



Teach safety skills by modeling how to: block/report, not respond to uncomfortable messages, document concerns, involve a trusted adult, avoiding triggering or inappropriate content, understand and avoid illegal content, and trust feelings of discomfort or overload.

Create Safe Setups for Online Devices



Create Safe Setups

Creating a safe digital foundation is the first step in online safety. For autistic individuals, thoughtful setup supports predictability, emotional regulation, and reduced cognitive load, which can lower anxiety and improve safe decision-making.

Caregivers should:

- **Create child-specific accounts** (not shared or adult profiles), which helps avoid confusing content and expectations.
- **Enable built-in parental controls and privacy settings** to reduce unexpected or overwhelming material.
- **Use strong, unique passwords** and teach basic password safety using visuals, repetition, and concrete rules.
- **Disable location sharing** and public profiles when not needed, as autistic individuals may interpret sharing requests literally.
- **Stay informed about current apps**, trends, and online risks, especially those that exploit social trust or special interests.



Keep settings and rules predictable and consistent

Predictability helps reduce anxiety and supports executive functioning. When possible, review device settings together so expectations are clear, visual, and transparent.





Look Over and Monitor Online Activity

Look at Online Activity

Monitoring is not spying, it's protective supervision that gradually supports independence.

Autistic individuals may have difficulty recognizing social manipulation, sarcasm, or hidden intentions, making adult oversight especially important.



TIP

Explain monitoring clearly and concretely

You can say:

"My job is to help keep you safe online, just like I do in the real world."

Clear explanations reduce feelings of punishment and support trust, especially for autistic individuals who value fairness and logic.



Effective Monitoring Includes

- Knowing anyone who may be trying to communicate with your child, including gaming chats and comment sections
- Reviewing friend lists, followers, and message requests, since autistic individuals may accept requests to be polite or avoid conflict
- Watching for sudden changes in behavior, such as increased shutdowns, meltdowns, sleep changes, or withdrawal
- Using monitoring tools appropriate to developmental level and support needs





Investigate Online Apps and Content

Investigate Apps



Approving apps is not just a yes/no decision, it's also a shared learning opportunity. Autistic individuals may focus deeply on preferred platforms or special interests, increasing both engagement and vulnerability.

When approving apps:

- **Review content**, chat features, and privacy settings together, using screenshots or step-by-step visuals
- **Discuss how people interact** on the platform, including teasing, sarcasm, and pretend behavior
- **Identify what to do** if someone feels confusing, overwhelming, or unsafe
- **Set clear rules** for messaging, voice chat, and live streaming, which can be socially complex and fast-paced



Rules May Include:

- *Only chatting with people they know in real life*
- *Never sharing their real name, school, or address*
- *Telling an adult if something feels confusing, stressful, or upsetting*

Clear rules are especially helpful for autistic individuals who may struggle with implied social expectations.





Control Online Content and Permissions

Control Content and Permissions



Controlling or restricting access to unsafe or overstimulating content is essential, especially for autistic individuals who may have difficulty disengaging from distressing material or regulating emotional responses once overwhelmed.

Helpful strategies:

- Use parental controls to filter content and limit screen time in ways that support regulation, not punishment.
- Turn off direct messaging or comments when appropriate to reduce social pressure and miscommunication.
- Choose developmentally appropriate platforms, not just those based on chronological age.
- Limit access to unmoderated forums or live chats, where social rules are unclear and risks are higher.
- Careful not to take tech tools away as a form of punishment or discipline.



Explain restrictions calmly, clearly, and consistently

You can say:

“This setting helps protect your mind, body, and feelings.”

“This setting helps you from feeling sad or confused.”

Clear, compassionate explanations help autistic individuals understand that limits are about safety, not punishment.





Keep Communicating and Teaching About Online Safety

Keep Communicating and Teaching

Ongoing conversations are the most powerful online safety tool. Autistic individuals often benefit from repetition, visuals, social stories, and real-life practice to build understanding over time.

Effective conversations:

- **Start early** and grow with age, experience, and support needs
- **Are frequent and brief**, rather than one long or abstract lecture
- **Use concrete examples**, visuals, and role-play scenarios
- **Teach what to do**, not just what to avoid
- **Encourage reporting without fear** of punishment or losing device access



TIP

Use Conversation starters to Keep Communication Going

“What do you like most about this app?”
“Has anyone ever said something online that confused you?”
“What would you do if someone asked for private information?”

These questions support communication, perspective-sharing, and emotional insight.



Stay Focused on Online Safety Skills



Stay Focused on Safety Skills



Autistic individuals benefit from **clear, practiced scripts and steps** for handling unsafe or uncomfortable online situations.

Key strategies to practice:

- Block and report bullying using step-by-step guidance.
- Do not respond to uncomfortable or confusing messages
- Screenshot and show a trusted adult.
- Trust feelings of confusion, discomfort, or overload, even if the other person seems “nice.”



Reinforce Often

“If something feels wrong or confusing, you will not get in trouble for telling.”



Resources and Tips for Parents

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NetSmartz): <https://www.missingkids.org/netsmartz/resources>

American Psychological Association: [apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/social-media-parent-tips](https://www.apa.org/topics/social-media-internet/social-media-parent-tips)

KidsHealth: kidshealth.org/en/parents/monitor-media.html

Parents: [parents.com/parentsirl/best-parental-monitoring-apps](https://www.parents.com/parentsirl/best-parental-monitoring-apps)

Report Exploitation to the CyberTipline: 1.800.843.5678

NCMEC’s CyberTipline is the nation’s centralized reporting system for the online exploitation of children. The public and electronic service providers can make reports of suspected online enticement of children for sexual acts, child sexual molestation, child sexual abuse material, child sex tourism, child sex trafficking, unsolicited obscene materials sent to a child, misleading domain names, and misleading words or digital images on the internet. Learn more at missingkids.org/gethelpnow/cybertipline

